

Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's First Democratically Elected President, Dies

By Declan Walsh and David D. Kirkpatrick

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KHARTOUM, Sudan — Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, collapsed and died while on trial in a Cairo courtroom on Monday, six years after the military ousted him in tumultuous circumstances that pushed Egypt back to autocratic rule.

The Egyptian authorities gave no official cause of death, but critics blamed the poor conditions in the prison where Mr. Morsi had spent the past six years. They said the authorities had deprived him of vital medicine for diabetes, high blood pressure and liver disease; held him in solitary confinement for long periods; and ignored repeated public warnings that the lack of proper medical care could be fatal.

“I think there is a very strong case to be made that this was criminal negligence, deliberate malfeasance in providing Morsi basic prisoner rights,” Sarah Leah Whitson, the executive director for the Middle East and North Africa at Human Rights Watch, said Monday. “He was very obviously singled out for mistreatment.”

His death was a somber milestone in Egypt's ill-fated democratic transition after the Arab Spring in 2011.

Mr. Morsi, 67, won Egypt's first free presidential election in 2012 as a senior leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, but was removed from power a year later in a military takeover. Since then he faced a raft of charges including terrorism, spying and breaking out of prison in trials that human rights groups say are deeply flawed.

He was in court to face espionage charges on Monday afternoon when he fell unconscious and died, Nabil Sadek, Egypt's prosecutor general, said in a statement.



Supporters of Mr. Morsi celebrating in Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2012, after he was announced the winner of the presidential election. Tomas Munita for The New York Times

Mr. Morsi had spoken for five minutes from the glass cage where prisoners are kept before the hearing was adjourned, Mr. Sadek said. Moments later Mr. Morsi collapsed and was rushed to a hospital, where he was pronounced dead on arrival.

In his final comments, Mr. Morsi continued to insist that he was Egypt's legitimate president, one of his lawyers told The Associated Press.

The first freely elected president in Arab history, and the first Islamist to occupy that role, Mr. Morsi was elected on June 17, 2012, seven years to the day before he died. His election was the apex of the Arab Spring uprising, and a high point for the Muslim Brotherhood, a 91-year-old Islamist movement founded in Egypt and whose influence extends across the Arab world.

For many Egyptians, Mr. Morsi's election was their greatest hope for a definitive break with the country's long history of autocracy after decades of harsh and corrupt rule under President Hosni Mubarak, who was ousted in the 2011 uprising.

Some Egyptians worried that he might impose strict Islamic moral codes, while critics in Washington and around the region raised alarms that he might even seek to establish a form of theocratic rule.

Mr. Morsi surprised many by seeking cordial relations with the United States and maintaining diplomatic ties with Israel. He developed a warm working relationship with President Barack Obama, and the two men worked together to help stop a bout of fighting between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas in the fall of 2012.

But at home, Mr. Morsi's rule was troubled from the start. He governed clumsily, at one point issuing a decree that critics said put him above the rule of law. Supporters said the decree was part of his efforts to grapple with a hostile security establishment that was actively maneuvering to undermine his authority.

Mr. Morsi making his first post-election appearance in 2012 in Tahrir Square, where he took a symbolic oath of office in front of supporters. Ed Giles/Getty Images

In the early summer of 2013, giant protests against Mr. Morsi filled Tahrir Square, the crucible of the 2011 uprising, providing the military with an excuse to oust him.

His defense minister, Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, seized power on July 3, 2013. Six weeks later, Egyptian security forces shot dead at least 817 protesters, mostly from the Muslim Brotherhood, in what human rights groups called the largest mass shooting of demonstrators in recent history.

Mr. el-Sisi was elected president in 2014 and still rules the country with an iron grip, with Egypt's democratic hopes largely extinguished.

A referendum in April to allow Mr. el-Sisi to remain in power until 2030 was passed overwhelmingly in a flawed vote that allowed no opposition voices.

Egyptian television channels, which are tightly controlled by the security services, offered equivocal coverage of Mr. Morsi's death. Some did not interrupt their usual programming to report the demise of a former president.

Other channels aired footage portraying the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. "Lies are an integral part of the Muslim Brotherhood," said a voice on CBC Extra, a private station, after a segment that showed Islamic State fighters threatening to attack Egyptian soldiers.

There was no immediate comment from President el-Sisi's office.

The handful of people in Egypt willing to speak sympathetically about Mr. Morsi avoided his politics and focused on the conditions of his detention. "He was a victim of brutal prison conditions," Gamal Eid, a lawyer and human rights advocate, said by phone from Cairo.

Egyptians opposing President Morsi starting a fire at a Muslim Brotherhood office in Alexandria, in 2013.
European Pressphoto Agency

Mr. Morsi had been charged with various crimes in politicized trials that have dragged through Egypt's slow-moving courts. In 2016 his son, Abdullah, told The New York Times that the family feared that the former president might fall into a diabetic coma.

Unlike most prisoners in Egyptian prisons, Mr. Morsi was barred from receiving deliveries of food and medicine from his family, said Ms. Whitson of Human Rights Watch. In addition to being held in solitary confinement, he was denied access to the news media, letters or other communication with the outside world. His wife and other family members were allowed visit just three times in the six years he was imprisoned.

In March of last year, a panel of British politicians and lawyers reviewing his treatment concluded that Mr. Morsi had received "inadequate medical care, particularly inadequate management of his diabetes and inadequate management of his liver disease."

Failure to address his care, the group warned, could put Mr. Morsi's life in danger. In a statement on Monday, Crispin Blunt, a member of Parliament who led the panel, said: "Sadly, we have been proved right."

Mr. Sadek, the Egyptian prosecutor, ordered an immediate investigation into the cause of death. In a statement, he said he would seek Mr. Morsi's medical file and order a committee to prepare a report on the cause of death.

Investigators will use surveillance footage from the courtroom and question witnesses who were with Mr. Morsi when he died, the statement said.

After overthrowing Mr. Morsi, Mr. el-Sisi sought to banish the Muslim Brotherhood, calling it a terrorist group and sparing little effort to discredit it among the Egyptian public. Most Brotherhood leaders are in jail or exile, and thousands of its members languish in Egypt's crowded prisons.

Mr. Morsi behind bars during his trial in Cairo at the police academy, in 2016.
Khaled Desouki/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In April, President Trump pushed to designate the Brotherhood a terrorist organization under pressure from Mr. el-Sisi, a close ally. The Pentagon and State Department objected, saying the group did not meet the definition of a terrorist entity.

Mr. Morsi was born into a family of modest means in Sharqiya, in the Nile Delta. He earned a Ph.D. in material science from the University of Southern California and later taught at Zagazig University, near Sharqiya. He was almost unknown to the Egyptian public, and most Islamists, before he ran for president in 2012.

The Brotherhood initially chose a more dynamic and well-known figure as its candidate. Mr. Morsi, the understudy, got the nomination only when the first choice was disqualified.

Speaking privately, many Brotherhood members now fault Mr. Morsi for his failures during the year he spent in office, in particular his inability to build broader public support and outmaneuver the hostile security services and Mr. el-Sisi.

Mr. Morsi never led the Brotherhood, a position held by its Supreme Guide, Mohammed Badie, since 2010. Mr. Badie was also imprisoned in 2013 and has been sentenced to seven terms of life imprisonment and a death sentence in various trials since then.

Mr. Morsi's death is unlikely to have much effect on the current direction of the group, already driven deep underground by the crackdown that followed his ouster.

Peter Mandaville, a professor at George Mason University and a former adviser to the State Department on political Islam, argued that Mr. Morsi’s death was resonating beyond the Brotherhood with other Egyptians who voted for him or “have concerns about the current government’s human rights record.”

“You already see it on Egyptian social media,” Professor Mandaville said. “Everybody is qualifying it with ‘this guy was a flawed politician and president’ but saying that what happened here today tells us something about the current state of the rule of law and respect for rights in Egypt.”

Mr. Morsi’s son Ahmed mourned his father on Facebook, writing: “Father, we will meet again, with God.”

Declan Walsh reported from Khartoum, and David D. Kirkpatrick from London. Nada Rashwan and Farah Saafan contributed reporting from Cairo.

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